

BOYS AND READING MOTIVATION

by Angie Woodson



As a children's librarian, I am painfully aware of how outnumbered the male population is at our library. The girls flock to the *American Girls*, *Junie B. Jones*, and *Olsen Twins* series. The boys trudge in with their mothers and grudgingly ask to see their accelerated reader list. At some point in time, boys lose the enthusiasm they once had for Clifford the Big Red Dog and become reluctant, almost embarrassed to be caught with a book in their hands. The issue of boys and literacy is in need of some serious attention. We all like to complain, discuss and berate the fact that we never see boys reading, but what are the real issues and how can we as librarians work toward improving the situation?

First, it's important to lay the groundwork and understand why boys are more reluctant to read traditional fiction literature than girls. Michael Gurian (2001), author of *Boys and Girls Learn Differently!* discusses some profound scientific gender differences in learning styles. In his book, Gurian states, "Girls, for instance, can acquire their complex verbal skills as much as a year earlier than boys. Thus, quite often a preschool girl reads faster and with a larger vocabulary than a peer boy does, and she speaks with better grammar. In general, female brains develop quicker than male brains" (2001, p. 26-27). Based on Gurian's statement, we can assume that boys get a slow start in the education realm and have a difficult time catching up. This helps to explain why we stop seeing boys in the library around 4th grade and typically don't see them again until they have reached adulthood. If you have any experience in the children's librarianship world, I'm sure you've witnessed this disappointing trend first hand.

Allison Haupt, coordinator of Children's and Young Adults' Services with North Vancouver District Public Library, wrote an article for the *Teacher Librarian* magazine discussing the biological and developmental differences between the genders. In her article, Haupt (2003) refers to a book by Anne Moir and David Jessel, *Brain Sex*. In the book, Moir and Jessel suggest that the very environment of schools is unnatural to boys. They

argue that "His is a world of action, exploration and things. But school tells him to sit quiet, listen, not fidget, and pay attention to ideas; everything, in fact, that his brain and body are telling him not to do." These natural biological urges experienced by boys obviously make learning in a traditional setting very difficult at times. These studies indicate if teachers do not adapt their teaching styles, boys will continue to struggle in the academic world. Failure to focus and learn in their education setting quite succinctly affects the boys' reading skills.

Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has conducted extensive research on a term he calls, flow, "joy, creativity, the process of total involvement with life" (Smith, 2002, p. 28). One of the characteristics Csikszentmihalyi uses to define flow is a sense of competence and control. In other words, people enjoy doing things they are good at. They feel a sense of confidence by participating in activities, which they excel in. According to the research conducted by Gurian, Moir and Jessel, boys are not likely to excel at reading. This failure to read well will create an attitude of awkwardness and reluctance that we as librarians must work to change.

In addition to scientific obstacles faced by boys, they are also confronted by several social factors, which prevent them from being enthusiastic readers. Jon Scieszka, author of the *Time Warp Trio* series, wrote an article pointing out the lack of positive male role models for reading. Contributing to this problem is the fact that seventy-five percent of elementary school teachers in the United States are women and the female elementary librarian is closer to eighty percent (Scieszka, 2003). Because of this demographic, boys are unfortunately subject to lesson plans, reading lists and activities that have subconsciously been geared toward girls. Although *Jane Eyre*, *Little Women* and *The Color Purple* are outstanding works of literature, they are not the type of material boys are attracted to. An important step in motivating boys to read is understanding the types of materials they enjoy and why they find these things stimulating.

I am always disappointed to hear parents discourage their sons from reading magazines, newspapers, or

comics. “No, you need to pick out a *real* book” is a common admonition heard by boys. The interesting thing that boys and adults fail to realize is that those non-traditional formats still require reading to communicate ideas. We need to drop the snobby attitudes and realize that these alternative forms of literacy are okay. In fact, they’re more than okay, they’re great! Graphic novels, comic books, websites, e-mails, magazines, and newspapers all require reading as the means of exchanging ideas. We, as librarians, need to expand our horizons and explore these different forms of reading. Let’s start graphic novel book clubs. Why not begin a website club where the kids research and annotate different websites each month? The sites could be published on a bookmark each week and distributed to the public.

Motivating boys to read is a problem that deserves and needs our attention. Let’s face this challenge. The ideas are endless, and I promise, the rewards will be too.

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